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Can Humanism Be an Environmentalism? A Further Response to Lewis P. Hinchmann

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Introduction

I have, from the perspective of environmental education, attached myself to that “significant current of opinion in environmentalist circles [that] has chosen to repudiate what its adherents call ‘humanism’.”¹ I have argued that there is more sense in seeing humanism as the root cause of the current environmental crisis than capitalism because capitalism is (like socialism) a child of humanism.² I have more recently argued, on the basis of a “fully semiotic” or biosemiotic perspective, that the boundaries of the human are more porous than has commonly been held in the Western tradition, and that therefore a “posthumanist” perspective is called for that both draws on the humanist tradition and goes beyond it.³ In none of these works have I suggested that humanism is undesirable; merely that it does not have the potential to adequately address environmental problems.

I am grateful to Lewis Hinchman for demanding that I, and like-minded commentators, take a more nuanced and generous view of humanism. However, I remain unconvinced of his final argument. In this paper, I shall therefore attempt to critique and refine his argument. This will be a differently focused critique from that already offered by Brian Baxter,⁴ though I am sympathetic to Baxter’s defence of the possible usefulness of socio-biology (indeed, of biology generally) in tackling environmental problems. I shall make further reference to Baxter’s critique from time to time.

Hinchman's Argument

To avoid any suggestion of an *ad hominem* attack (which is certainly unintended), Hinchman's argument will hereafter be referred to as HA.

Firstly, I shall question whether there is a consistent and identifiable argument.

HA maintains that environmental concern has always been an aspect of humanism. What has caused a "growing estrangement"⁵ between them is not the fault of humanism but rather of deterministic and reductive socio-biology. Ultimately, HA's main concern seems methodological: to separate those whose interests are humanistic in the sense of "practising the methods of the humanities"⁶—"phenomenology, existentialism, . . . hermeneutics"⁷ and general critique—from those whose science is dominated, or even tinged, by "behaviourism and positivism."⁸ HA draws this circle very wide, so that figures such as Kant and Marcuse are enlisted as humanists. As Baxter⁹ asserts, surely it is an extreme claim that such non-humanistic approaches (carefully excluded from a very wide pantheon) can tell us nothing of value about the very nature that we are attempting to study, preserve and enhance. Indeed, HA has little to say about how humanistic commentators might make use of hard science, but many do. Indeed, the current wave of concern about global warming is prompted by such science, since its effects on human experience are, as yet, very limited in countries such as the UK and US. At the end,¹⁰ HA does acknowledge this ("Learning to read the land requires a long apprenticeship in several fields of natural science") but should not be "ahistorical and abstract...like physics." This is surely to erect a straw man; in this case the scientist who is not also a human being. If it were the common practice of scientists to have no humanity, this would indeed be a concern, but there are no grounds for assuming that this is so. Science does not make us understand the world. Human beings undertake science and interpret its results; there is a human agent employing the scientific methods. Science is undertaken within the phenomenal worlds of real human beings. This does not totally invalidate Hinchman's concerns, since people might well pay too much attention to science and too little to (say) phenomenology or hermeneutics, but the argument cannot validly proceed on the assumption that science is an entirely a-human activity.

HA is entitled "Is Environmentalism a Humanism?" but this is merely rhetorical, even disingenuous, as the author has already made up his mind that it is. At no point is any counter-position seriously considered. The point of HA would therefore seem more accurately to argue the

case that environmentalism is grounded in humanism rather than discuss whether it is. What looks from the title to be a hypothesis is not actually tested in the Popperian sense of subjecting it to attempts at falsification, and what seems to be a possible conclusion is, in effect, taken also as a premise. Indeed, it is not clear how the premises differ from the conclusion or, indeed, what they are. On this view, HA is rather an assertion with evidence than a reasoned argument. It should be evaluated, therefore, in terms of the strength of that evidence.

My next concern is whether the proposition itself is clear and consistent.

We might ask whether the assertion, the claim of HA, is clear and consistent in itself, and what it actually amounts to. It is not entirely clear. Even within the Abstract, we are told both that “Humanism has much closer affinities to environmentalism than the latter’s advocates believe” and that Aldo Leopold’s *Sand County Almanac* is “the paradigm case of environmental thought with roots in humanist approaches.”¹¹ However, there is a difference between having roots in something and having close affinities with it, and even close affinities do not amount to synonymy. (Maybe “roots” don’t either.) Regarding the first point: it might be argued that both dialectical materialism and Nazism (as an expression of German Romantic nationalism) have “roots” in Hegel, or that both fascism and postmodernism have “roots” in Nietzsche. Regarding the second, humanism might have “close affinities” with environmentalism but be subsumed within it rather than (as HA maintains) the reverse. I have close affinities with the Welsh, since my wife comes from there and my son was born there; this does not mean I am Welsh. Indeed, I could deny strongly that I was Welsh without severing my ties with that nation. However, this is not a possibility HA considers with respect to humanism vis-à-vis environmentalism.

The assertion of HA is not clear from the start, therefore. However, by the end the confusion is compounded. On page 24, we read: “Returning to our original question, namely whether environmental theory is irredeemably committed to a naturalism or biologism that humanists must spurn, we can now conclude that it is not.”

This, however, was not the original question; indeed, no such question is clearly evident in the first part of the paper. It also looks from the above as though the paper is grounded in the assumption that “environmental theory” is grounded in “naturalism or biologism,” but this is itself questionable, and an alternative position will be developed in the following section. HA is surely right to assume that environmentalists draw on biology and naturalistic assumptions, but it

cannot be inferred from this that they draw on nothing else, even if they cast themselves as anti-humanist (notwithstanding Baxter's published riposte in defence of biology). There is a wealth of literature, for example, on Darwin as a cultural figure with, furthermore, strong concerns for the position and dignity of humanity.¹²

The central assertion of HA is neither clear nor consistent, therefore, and where it attempts clarity it does so partly by oversimplification. Nevertheless, there is a clear message, even if this falls short of an entirely satisfactory proposition; it runs something along the lines of there being more environmentalism in the humanist tradition than is often acknowledged, so environmentalism is heavily indebted to humanism and neglects that debt at its peril. We are, indeed, offered many illuminating and convincing examples of environmental concern in early humanist thought.

I shall next consider the evidence base in HA.

An interesting question arises here concerning the valid ground rules for critique. HA dismisses as invalid any conception of humanism that is not grounded in the academic literature: "If one wants to attack a particular mode of thought, one should confront its most coherent, well-thought out embodiments, not its vaguer, popular forms."¹³ Surely the validity of this depends on the context of the debate. My child's teacher might judge that my child is intelligent or unintelligent, or makes an effort or does not make an effort, thereby operationalizing outmoded (in academic terms) or ill-understood conceptions of unitary intelligence and effort uninformed by the latest psychological literature. Would it be invalid, on these grounds, to critique such teachers? Would there be no value in researching what schools think they are doing when they assess children for effort, on the grounds that they do not have academically robust understandings of the concept? Clearly not, in either case: in such instances, it is professional or lay understandings that are important. Environmentalism, like education, is a vast and barely definable field embracing many actors with many agendas. The way things are understood in the real world are, on this account, very fit matters for debate—as, one might expect, a historian, hermeneuticist or phenomenologist (whose methods are lauded in HA) would acknowledge. An academic critique should surely be grounded in a thorough understanding of the relevant academic literature but, at the same time, in the context of the application of that literature within the popular debate. There are many people who subscribe to humanist beliefs and even organisations. I maintain that such conceptions of humanism should be considered, albeit in a rigorously academically informed context. Not to do so would be the equivalent of discussing

Marxism with relation to social policy but with no attention whatever to its manifestations and effects in espousedly Marxist states: an approach which might, it must be acknowledged, have certain attractions for committed academic Marxists. Humanism as now popularly understood is therefore fit matter (albeit not all the fit matter) for such a critique. In this case, therefore, those for whom “humanism is . . . associated with a style of technocratic management,”¹⁴ for example, should not have their impressions simply dismissed as invalid; rather, one might attempt to understand the genealogy of such a position. This is not, of course, to claim that such construals cannot be regarded as unfortunate or mistaken interpretations of core ideas, as long as the case is made; the point is that such construals have explanatory power for environmentalists that cannot so easily be brushed aside.

The HA commitment to academic rigour above, which might amount to a form of smoke-and-mirrors in the present case, allows HA to avoid engaging with a very simple point of critique that has not, as far as I know, been addressed in the academic literature on humanism to which HA refers. This is that humanism was not developed in a historical and cultural context in which there was any perceived danger of human beings destroying or damaging nature itself, using up natural resources, or destroying the planet. These were simply not concerns for Early Modern and Enlightenment people, nor even, arguably, for most twentieth-century phenomenologists or critical theorists, whose work, I agree,¹⁵ is grounded in humanist assumptions. Unfortunately, as this (very simple) point of criticism is not grounded in the academic literature sanctioned by HA, it would presumably be dismissed as invalid.

My final criticism is that, while HA eschews critique from beyond a certain literature, it simultaneously embraces sources that may not universally be accepted as humanist. Notably, it includes Marxist humanists such as Marcuse, and other figures for whom an argument can clearly be made that they are in some senses humanist, although they are often not seen as leading exponents. A key example in HA is that of Kant. A number of figures associated with critical theory and existentialism are also included. One example is that of Jaspers. According to the current entry in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, for example:

Arguably, Jaspers was always a humanist; certainly, if humanism is defined as a doctrine which seeks to account for the specificity, uniqueness and dignity of human life his work can, from the outset, be seen as a variant on philosophical humanism.¹⁶

This is a guarded acceptance of Jaspers as a humanist. Such liminality is not to be found in HA, where a humanist tradition is set firmly against a reductive, naturalistic one, with no acknowledgement of possible blurring of boundaries. It is this all-or-nothing approach that I shall attempt to problematize in the next section.

In conclusion, HA offers a rich and illuminating tour of major sites associated with the humanist tradition. It does not attempt to critique that tradition but only that which is set against it. However, this polarization is set up without much attempt at reasoned argument.

The Limits of Humanity and Humanism: An Attempt at Clarification

HA is premised on the assumption (though it is also its conclusion) that the human lifeworld cannot be reduced to (mere) nature. Implicit in this is the view that human beings, as free, reasoning, moral, feeling agents sit above the natural, for which they are responsible—hence the sense of hurt at the charge that humanism cannot be environmentalist.

I question the basis of the assumption of complete qualitative distinction between human and non-human nature, arguing (as many have before) that it is based on an untenable Cartesian substance dualism.¹⁷ My own attempt to problematize that dualism lies in questioning the sign-signal distinction; I argue, for example, that John Dewey, who attempted to unify “body-mind”¹⁸ was prevented from his strongly naturalistic bias from unifying signal and sign.¹⁹ On the grounds of this “fully semiotic” account, I have argued that humanistic accounts are inherently inadequate to satisfactorily address environmental problems.

First, let us consider what is at stake here. The vast majority of environmentalists want good lives—as good lives as possible—for themselves and their successors on Earth. In general, therefore, notwithstanding many environmentalists’ opposition to economic growth, there is no fundamental threat to humanism from environmentalists on that basis. The argument is rather over the basis on which such a future can be secured. HA warns us against a dehumanizing naturalism here, while some environmentalists, myself included, are wary of a scheme that clearly sets human concerns apart from non-human interests (in the broadest sense).

Let us attempt some clarification of the human–non-human divide prior to discussing the implications arising from such a clarification for the present debate.

Suppose that my phenomenal world, incorporating the sum total of my present experience, and involving my different awarenesses of past and future, can be referred to as my “My Now” (MMN). This is a phenomenologically, or phenomenographically, or existentially derived definition, though as comprehensive as possible on those terms. It does not attempt, for example, to clarify the nature of “now” beyond “what I am experiencing.” It accepts as valid that I have experience. Furthermore, this experience carries with it traces, of previous “nows” and awareness of other experiencing persons. Again, it cannot be proved ultimately that “Your My Now” (YMN) is real for you, but, on the basis that you are likely to respond that you do experience, I can safely posit that the world comprises not only My My Now but also as many Your My Nows as there are people in the world. At least, therefore, I can conclude that the totality of phenomenal experience comprises $MMN + YMN^n$ (to the power of n). Insofar as all knowledge and understanding can be construed as human understanding, all knowledge and understanding is, indeed, contained within this collective human phenomenological world. On this view, the “rest of nature” is non-experiencing, and is therefore apt for (responsible) use as standing-reserve, or resource, for humans. It would be appropriate to think only of human beings in terms of constructs such as betterment, spirituality, aspiration responsibility, morality, reason and intelligence; there would be little argument for, say, animal rights. This, it can be argued, is the basis of the humanist tradition, from the Renaissance to critical theory. However, even humanists do not always accept this account at face value. For example, many humanists may embrace the notion of cruelty to animals, but if animals feel pain or other forms of hurt, then they have phenomenal worlds.

Ironically, and not at all in the spirit of HA—though very much in the spirit of Baxter’s response—research in the positivist sciences has increasingly pointed us, in recent years, towards an acknowledgement that other animals have phenomenal worlds. Not only do we share nearly all our genetic material with chimpanzees, for example: we also share some capacity for tool use and language.²⁰ Furthermore, such acknowledgements take no account of the possibility that other species are likely to have experiences we cannot have as humans, though science (again) makes it seem extremely unlikely that this is not the case: one thinks of the dolphins’ capacity to communicate, for example, and there may be many capacities of which we are fully unaware, not least because of the limits of our human senses. We know that other

animals share our senses, and that, in many cases, they are much more acute than ours.

Even a limited acknowledgement of non-human phenomenal worlds, such as that animals can “feel” in some way we only dimly recognize, problematizes the basis of the humanist world view. It does not completely invalidate it, since it does not deny that human beings might be special—chosen by God to govern the Earth, even—but it does problematize it if we have duties not only to other people but to non-human sentient beings.

If there are other “My Nows” (OMN) beyond the human, this has no implication for the limits of human understanding, which remains the collective understanding of human beings. However, it does render that understanding partial in a new sense, since the whole phenomenal world is now $MMN + YMN^n + OMN^n$. Furthermore, we have no idea how far the collective OMN extends. It may be that only higher mammals are sentient. Alternatively, on a fully pansemiotic account, for example,²¹ everything in the universe “lives” in terms of responding to signs or signals, or both, where the sign-signal distinction is unclear, and where this may even embrace artificial intelligence. Such an account problematizes the category of life itself and not merely that of the human. There is much here that we do not confidently know, but this uncertainty serves to problematize the human–non-human distinction as much as any other. It may be relevant to note here that humanism is not easily compatible with animism and has flourished in contexts where the latter has declined or disappeared.

In addition, it is apposite to question the borders of the human from within the human. These are by no means clear in all contexts. For example, under current English law, a foetus is not human (in the sense of enjoying human rights) whereas a victim of brain damage kept alive only by machinery is. Indeed, some might argue (such as Finkelkraut 2001) that many, or most, people in the world are not regarded as fully human, and it is clearly the case that certain groups, in certain contexts, are denied the human rights due to others. It is also clear that the phenomenal worlds of both the foetus and the brain-damage victim are likely to be radically different from those of healthy children and adults. Furthermore, the human is increasingly cyborg with each new piece of life-enhancing technology, from spectacles and hearing aids to prosthetic limbs and pacemakers, not to mention our dependence on certain companion animals.²²

On the above grounds, I maintain that we cannot safely make absolute qualitative distinctions between the human and the non-human, though we are inevitably anthropocentric in the sense of seeing the world

through human eyes and maintaining prior concern not only for our own species but for those closest to us (variously defined) within it. I further maintain that this either falls short of, or transcends humanism though it bears affinities to it and, indeed, has some of its roots (but not all of them) within it. In arguing for a posthumanist approach to policy and practice, I, for one, am not arguing for a rejection of humanism, but rather for an acknowledgement that it simply is not enough. Asking humanism to solve the environmental crisis is like asking a plumber to make it rain. It is “language go[ing] on holiday” in Wittgensteinian terms.²³ Whether we like it or not, we are now called on to do what the early humanists considered some of God’s work and the later humanists have failed to recognize as issues of overriding importance.

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Notes

¹ Hinchman 2004, p. 4.

² Stables and Scott 1999; 2001.

³ Stables 2005; 2006.

⁴ 2006.

⁵ Hinchman, p. 4.

⁶ not quoted.

⁷ Hinchman, p. 11.

⁸ Hinchman, p. 14.

⁹ 2004.

¹⁰ Hinchman, p. 25.

¹¹ Hinchman, p. 3.

¹² Richards, 2002.

¹³ Hinchman, p. 6–7.

¹⁴ Hinchman, p. 6.,

¹⁵ Stables and Scott 1999.

¹⁶ Retrieved from <http://plato.stanford.edu> 15 February 2008.

¹⁷ Stables 2005; 2006.

¹⁸ Dewey 1925.

¹⁹ Stables 2008.

²⁰ See, for example, the work of the Language Research Center at Georgia State University for increasing evidence of the similarities in cognitive processing between, in particular, children and other primates. <http://www2.gsu.edu/~wwwlrc/research-main.htm>. See also the work of Jane Goodall on chimpanzee language and tool use and other aspects of animal intelligence: <http://www.janegoodall.org/jane/cv.asp> retrieved 14 November 2006.

²¹ Skrbina 2005.

²² Haraway 1991.

²³ Wittgenstein 1953, para. 38.